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SUBJECT: STRAINS WITH ROMANIA "SURPRISE" UKRAINE

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Classified By: Political Counselor Colin Cleary for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

Summary

1. (C) Ukrainian officials express surprise at recent strains in Ukrainian-Romanian relations. They blame Romania for making "unacceptable" last-minute demands on a trans-border travel agreement that resulted in the abrupt cancellation of a visit by President Basescu in February. They also voice consternation at Romania's much-publicized expulsion of two Romanian defense attaches (which Ukraine reciprocated). Many Ukrainian observers suspect that Basescu is posturing against Ukraine for domestic political advantage in advance of Presidential elections. Some contend (but produce no evidence) that Russia is somehow fanning bilateral tensions. End Summary.

Scuttled Presidential Visit

2. (C) Ukrainian officials point to the abrupt cancellation of the visit of President Basescu, which had been scheduled for February 23, as a barometer of strains in bilateral relations. Bohdan Yaremenko, Deputy Head of the Foreign Policy section of the Presidential Secretariat confirmed to us that Basescu's cancellation surprised the GOU. Arrangements were well advanced when, ten days before the visit, the Romanian side demanded "new and unacceptable conditions" for an agreement on trans-border travel. The agreement was to have been a centerpiece deliverable the meeting of the Ukraine-Romania Presidential Commission (the second meeting of this forum; the first was in October 2007 during a Yushchenko visit to Romania). Yaremenko added that, not only had the Romanians forced the visit's cancellation, they also deliberated for five days over a one-sentence joint statement announcing it. MFA Director General for Central Europe Sergey Mishchenko told us that it was clear that the Romanians had been putting up obstacles and had wanted to kill the visit.

Defense Attaches Expelled

3. (C) On March 4, Romania announced the expulsion of two Ukrainian defense attaches. Yaremenko told us that as far as he knew, the attaches had done nothing wrong. Whatever the case, he argued that Romania should have dealt with the matter quietly. Rada Defense Committee Chairman (and former Minister of Defense) Anatoliy Hrytsenko termed it an "unfriendly act" and called for reciprocal expulsions (which took place on March 5). Ihor Smeshko, former head of the Ukrainian Security Service, termed the press coverage surrounding the expulsion "extraordinary."

4. (C) Yaremenko suspected -- as did former FM Boris Tarasyuk and other Ukrainian officials and observers with whom we spoke -- that President Basescu, with upcoming presidential

elections in mind, was looking to score political points by taking a tough line on Ukraine. Yaremenko admitted that the expulsion, like the cancellation of the Basescu visit, caught Ukraine "totally by surprise." He said the GOU was "looking at options" for how to deal with Romania.

"Greater Romania"

15. (C) Political analyst Oleksey Haran told us that Ukrainians were worried about Romanian activities in and designs on the Bukovina region, which includes parts of western Ukraine. Indeed, the Romanian diplomat and attache expelled in the tit for tat expulsions were serving in the Consulate in Chernivtsi Oblast, on the Romanian border, where Romania has been accused of agitating among ethnic Romanian civic organizations.

16. (C) Analyst Natalya Bilotsir from the US-Ukraine foundation told us that, at lower political levels and academic levels, Romania is pushing Ukraine to reclassify Romanian and Moldovan minority groups in Ukraine into one "Romanian Speaking" minority group. She said that there are currently 250,000 self-identified Moldovans in Ukraine, and only 100,000 self-identified Romanians. Combining the two groups would result in a "Romanian Speaking" minority that outnumbered all other minority groups in Ukraine except Russians.

17. (C) Yaremenko told us that the GOU was concerned that the current Romanian government seeks to follow a "Greater Romania" policy. This did not involve territorial ambitions,

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but it did involve asserting Romania into the affairs of neighboring regions where there are Romanian minorities. MFA DG Mishchenko told us that EU rules on minorities gave Romania more prerogatives where there were more ethnic Romanians. Hence their desire to inflate the number. Mishchenko asserted that there are 141 Romanian language schools in Ukraine but only one Ukrainian language school in Romania - even though there are 70,000 Ukrainians living there.

Snake Island Decision

18. (SBU) On February 3, the UN International Court of Justice (ICJ) unanimously ruled that Snake Island was a Ukrainian island, but that the surrounding sea shelf would be split between Romania and Ukraine at a line between their respective claims, with Ukraine gaining a 12 nautical mile exclusion zone around the island itself. Both the GOU and the Romanian government have said they would accept the court's decision as final, and both have portrayed the decision as a victory for their respective sides. Ukrainian political analyst Haran told us that it was unclear who won in the ICJ decision, but that opponents of Ukrainian western integration were pushing the idea that Ukraine lost. The Presidential Secretariat's Yaremenko confirmed to us that while the GOU "does not like" the court's decision, it would abide by it.

Not Much Help

19. (C) Serhiy Horopakha, MFA desk officer for Romania, told us that, despite hopes that Romania would assist Ukraine in its preparations for NATO membership, Romania had done little. Analyst Bilotsir contended that the bilateral relationship was "neither close, nor strategic." She said that Bucharest's approach to Ukraine had changed once Romania gained EU membership. After that, Romanian counterparts became "overbearing," she contended.

Rumors of a Russian Hand

¶10. (C) Yaremenko told us that some in the GOU suspected Russia might be trying to stoke tensions between Romania and Ukraine to diminish Ukraine as a candidate for the NATO and EU. Prominent political analysts Volodymyr Fesenko and Haran also told us they suspected that Russia was behind the tensions, particularly regarding the Ukrainian Defense Attaches. While none of our contacts had evidence to back up such suspicions, press commentary alleged that the Ukrainian attaches might have been working for Moscow.

Comment

¶11. (C) Ukraine's current testy relationship with Romania stands in contrast to the productive relationship Romania has forged with Poland. While historical baggage with Poland was heavy, common interests propelled the relationship forward. The same should be true with Romania. The ICJ's decision on the Snake Island dispute should remove that as a point of contention. As elections cycles move forward in both countries, opportunities should arise to press the re-start button on bilateral relations.
TAYLOR